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ABSTRACT

After completing a survey in 2001 for a nonprofit library network, the researcher used the database to study response rates and response consistency between two survey methods. Information on more than 1,400 potential respondents had been collected from the network's database and four other library databases. Half of the librarians (n=699) had provided contact information that included e-mail addresses. A traditional mailing procedure was used to collect information from those who had given only postal contact information (n=730); others received an e-mail survey, with radio buttons and drop-down boxes. The response rates from the two methods were similar, and attitudes toward questions about the use of the Internet did not show a difference between the two groups of respondents. Librarians who responded to the postal survey were more likely to be from smaller institutions. The reliability estimates from each method were well within acceptable ranges, but the postal survey obtained higher values than the Web-based method. However, the amount of missing data was significantly reduced when the Web-based survey was used. An appendix contains the survey instruments. (Contains 5 tables and 24 references.) (SLD)

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Comparing Responses to Mail and Web-based Surveys

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As the technology and tools to use the Internet become more streamlined, the option of using the World Wide Web to conduct survey research becomes more and more attractive. This method requires fewer resources and provides faster responses than the traditional paper and pencil methods. However, new methodologies create questions about response consistency, response rates, and technical issues related to the technology. The Internet's potential for academic and applied research has recently begun to be acknowledged and assessed, but comparisons with more traditional survey methods must be conducted (Sheehan & Hoy, 1999; Sussman, 2001; Yun & Trumbo, 2000).

As a consultant, this researcher has the opportunity to conduct a number of surveys for professional organizations and academicians each year. In 2001, a survey for a nonprofit library network in the Southeastern United States was conducted, using a database of over 1400 names. Half of the names in the database had mailing addresses and e-mail addresses, while the other half had only mailing addresses. In order to expedite the process and save on costs, two methods were used to contact the sample. One was a traditional three-wave mailing procedure. The other used e-mail with a link to a website where the same questionnaire was located.

The survey was not conducted as an experiment. The data received from the respondents were used to create reports for the client. After completion of the project, the idea of using the data for this analysis was conceived. No individual demographic data was obtained on the respondents. Only the institutions' characteristics were of importance to the client. Although the results discussed in the remainder of this article were not obtained under experimental conditions, the opportunity to compare the data from the two survey methods proved irresistible.

Definition of Terms

With the surge in computerization in the last decade, a clarification of terms is necessary when discussing different survey methods.

A traditional postal survey involves a questionnaire, a cover letter, and a return envelope. To maximize response rate, many postal surveys include a follow-up postcard, and at least one additional full mailing of the survey. Some postal surveys include pre-notification letters and more follow-ups. Data entry is necessary to convert the responses on paper to an electronic database.

E-mail surveys are simpler to compose than Web-based surveys, but they are more limited to their visual stimulation and interaction capabilities. At the present, an e-mail survey is no more than a text message that requires no skills above those used to compose and send a message to a friend. They cannot provide for skip patterns and other intensive programming options (Dillman, 2000). Again, data entry is necessary to convert the responses in the e-mail to an electronic database.

Web-based surveys share the same type of computer to computer communication over the Internet with e-mail surveys, but they "provide survey capabilities far beyond those available for any other type of self-administered questionnaire" (Dillman, 2000, p. 354). Extensive and difficult skip patterns can be designed so that they are invisible to the respondent. Color, animation, and audio can be incorporated. Coding and data management is all handled electronically and provides a complete database ready for analysis at survey end, thus removing one source of error—human data entry error.

Relevant Literature

Response Rates

Response rates to e-mail surveys have significantly decreased since 1986 (Sheehan, 2001). In 1986, results from the first e-mail survey were published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Kiesler & Sproull, 1986). Moreover, in the past decade, the popular press has reported that response rates are declining for all types and manner of surveys (Bickard & Schmittlein, 1999).

Matz (1999) reported response rates to a Web survey were not as high as traditional paper surveys. Sheehan (2001) attempted to identify as many e-mail surveys done for academic purposes as possible and only 31 surveys could be identified that contained sufficient data to conduct an analysis of response rate. The results suggested that e-mail survey response rates have followed the pattern of survey response rates overall in the United States. Sheehan posed several questions about the value of e-mail surveys: (a) Would a link to a Web site be easier than other e-mail methods? (b) Do we need to provide multiple options to increase response rates? and (c) Should we continue to even try to evaluate e-mail surveys as a viable data collection method or should we focus our attention on increasing reliability of surveys on the Web? Although Web-based surveying raises a host of new methodological issues, Dillman (2000) argues that "no other method of collecting survey data . . . offers so much potential for so little cost" (p. 400).

Response Consistency

The quality of data among survey methods is an issue for researchers. Electronic surveys are increasingly more common and research comparing electronic vs. postal surveys is beginning to confirm that electronic survey content results may be no different than postal survey content results (Andrews, Nonnecke, & Preece, 2001). Some studies provide evidence that the e-mail survey has more non-response items than paper-and-pencil surveys (Bachmann & Elfrink, 1996; Sproull, 1986). Others argue that there is minimal difference between approaches (King & Miles, 1995; Matz, 1999; Tse, 1998) and that e-mail methods generate fewer non-response items (Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). Stanton (1998) found that the number of missing data points decreased in the Internet survey, but found no difference in variability or internal patterning of the data. These findings suggest that "e-research" is comparable to the traditional mail-in method and improves data collection.

Yun and Trumbo (2000) reported that respondent characteristics differed (between traditional paper-and-pencil and Web-based surveys) in the variables that are explicitly and implicitly related to the use of communication technology. Buchanan and Smith (1999) compared the responses on a paper and pen self-monitoring scale to a Web-based equivalent. They found comparable results between the groups and that the Web-based participants had slightly higher reliability than the comparison group.

Yun and Trumbo (2000) did not observe significant influences of survey mode (postal, e-mail, and Web). The results of their study led them to report that the differences detected in the response groups indicate that using multi-mode survey techniques improved the representativeness of the samples without biasing other results.

Issue salience

Salience of an issue to the sampled population has been found to have a strong positive correlation with response rate for postal, e-mail, and Web-based surveys (Sheehan & McMillan, 1999; Watt, 1999). Salience has been defined as the association of importance and/or timeliness with a specific topic (Martin, 1994). Heberlein and Baumgartner (1978) reported that issue salience had more influence on mail survey response rates than other factors such as respondent contact and monetary incentives. Bean and Roszkowski (1995) suggested salience has more influence on response rate than survey length.

Technical problems

Another potential problem for electronic surveys is that of multiple submissions. If the researcher designs the survey with an anonymous response function it is almost impossible to detect multiple submissions. The problem is even more complex with the Web survey. Researchers may assume that Web site visits from the same IP address are from a single person, but in reality it may not be true (Smith, 1997). Using different methods of identifying the respondent and guaranteeing confidentiality is key to combating some of the more esoteric aspects of conducting a Web-based survey.

Current Study

Procedure

After completing a survey in 2001for a nonprofit library network in the Southeastern United States this researcher used the database to study response rates and response consistency between two survey methods. Information on more than 1400 potential respondents had been collected from the network's database and four other library databases. Half of the librarians' had contact information that included an e-mail address. A traditional mailing procedure was used to obtain responses to a 4-page printed questionnaire from those individuals in institutions who had provided only postal contact information (Appendix A).

For those individuals with an e-mail address, the survey was conducted by e-mail, with a link to a Web-based questionnaire created from the printed questionnaire. The Web-based questionnaire was identical to the print survey. The hyperlink in the e-mail cover letters (Appendix B) led the respondent to the questionnaire at the researcher's website, which is hosted by Earthlink. The Web-based questionnaire was developed using Microsoft software, FrontPage, with a link to an Access database. Radio buttons and drop-down boxes were used for answer options. Each question was programmed so that the answer options were adhered to (i.e., only one choice could be selected if only one answer was required). Each respondent was required to provide an e-mail address before they could submit their responses.

The survey was conducted in October and November 2001. The Web-based procedure (n = 699) included two e-mail contacts, three weeks apart, with potential respondents. The mail procedure (n = 730) included a first full mailing, a postcard reminder one week later, and a second full mailing to nonrespondents two weeks after the postcard. Responses to the Web-based questionnaire were electronically downloaded into a database, while the responses from the questionnaires returned by mail were hand entered into a database.

Respondents to the electronic questionnaire were asked to provide their e-mail address so no further follow-ups would be made to them. Their e-mail addresses were hand filtered from the database as their response was received. Mailed questionnaires were coded to track the response rate and reduce the number of pieces of follow-up mail. Their mailing addresses were hand filtered from the database as their response was received. Respondents were assured confidentiality by the research firm and the researcher conducting the survey. The client (the library network) received a report with only aggregate data. All analyses of the response sets were conducted using SPSS.

Response Rates

The researcher subjectively rated the salience value for this survey at 2 or 3 on a scale of 1(low) to 5 (high). The topic (preservation) is an important but often under-funded (therefore, neglected) aspect of library management. Additionally, all the members of the sample were librarians, but not all were employed at institutions that were members of the library network (the sponsoring agency).

Response rate, which has been linked to issue salience, was not as high for this survey as for previous surveys conducted for the library network (Table 1). Refusals (those individuals who elected not to participate after contact had been made) and bad postal addresses reduced the postal database from 730 to 709. Responses numbered 192 for a response rate of 27% for the postal survey. Refusals and bad e-mail addresses reduced the Web-based database from 699 to 616. Responses numbered 186 for a response rate of 30% for the Web-based survey. No information was collected as to response rate after each wave of the postal or electronic reminders.

Statistically, there was no difference in the response rate of the two methods. This finding does not support that of Shannon and Bradshaw (2002) who found that electronic surveys did not generate a response rate as high as mail surveys. The larger number of bad addresses from the Web-based procedure is consistent with a number of studies using electronic surveys (Couper, Blair, & Triplett, 1997; Sheehen & Hoy, 1999; Smith, 1997).

Table 1. *Response Rates*

	Original database	Bad addresses/ refusals	Responses	Response rate	χ^2
Web-based	699	83	186	.30	
Postal	730	21	192	.27	2.94 (ns)

Response Consistency

The librarians who participated in the survey responded to a number of items concerning preservation issues at their institutions. Of particular importance to the client (the library network) was the representation of the respondents across the region represented by the library network. Additional institutional demographic variables were staff size (FTE) of the institution and the cost of preservation activities in the previous fiscal year. An analysis of the responses by survey method showed no differences between the two methods in the representation from the 11 states in the region (Table 2). No differences were found in the previous fiscal year's cost of

preservation activities. The size of the staff (FTE) was significantly different between the two methods. The individuals responding to the Web-based questionnaire reported that their institutions were manned by larger staffs than those responding to the postal questionnaire.

Table 2. *Representation of Responses between Methods*

	Web-based		Postal			
	n	%	n	%	χ^2	*p*
State						
Alabama	19	3.9	7	3.9		
Arkansas	3	1.6	3	1.7		
Florida	23	12.0	24	13.4		
Georgia	22	11.5	24	13.4		
Kentucky	15	7.8	18	10.1		
Louisiana	14	1.3	8	4.5		
Mississippi	9	4.7	12	6.7		
North Carolina	23	15.1	24	13.4		
South Carolina	15	7.8	19	10.6		
Tennessee	18	3.4	9	5.0		
Virginia	25	13.0	31	17.3	12.13	.28
	M	SD	M	SD	*t*	*p*
Cost preservation activities in last year	30581	86067	37017	138462	-.47	.64
Number of FTE staff	49.46	113.10	17.34	49.12	3.43	<.01

Differences occurred in the internal consistency of the several sets of Likert scaled items (Table 3). Across the board, the reliability of the scales from the postal respondents was higher than those from the Web-based respondents. This finding is not consistent with results from Buchanan and Smith (1999) who found Web-based participants had slightly higher reliability.

Table 3. *Reliabilities of Selected Sections of Questionnaire*

Section of Questionnaire	number of items	Cronbach's alpha Web-based	Postal
Question 1 (now)	9	.73	.80
Question 1 (3 years in future)	9	.73	.79
Question 2	9	.83	.88
Question 3	9	.83	.90

Items that related to technology involving the Internet were also analyzed for the consistency of the responses between the two methods. Those who responded electronically were more likely to chose Web-based training, but were as interested as their colleagues who responded by mail in Internet publications, Internet training, or information gained from the Internet for their preservation needs (Table 4). This finding is not consistent with the general findings of Shannon and Bradshaw (2002) who reported that respondents to an electronic survey had more favorable attitudes toward technology than respondents to a postal survey.

Table 4. *Comparison of Responses Related to Technology*

	Web-based n	Web-based %	Postal n	Postal %	χ^2	*p*
Web-based training (% prefer)	89	45.2	65	32.9	3.36	.07
Use Internet publications about preservation needs (% who do)	99	50.3	84	46.2	.64	.43
Use Internet to gain access to training for preservation needs (% who do)	34	17.3	41	22.5	1.65	.20
Use Internet to gain information about preservation needs (% who do)	142	72.1	120	65.9	1.38	.20

The questionnaire contained 110 items. Missing items were summed for each respondent (Table 5). The amount of missing data was significantly greater from the postal questionnaire than from the Web-based questionnaire. This finding is consistent with those of Schaefer and Dillman (1998) who reported that e-mail methods generate fewer non-response items.

Table 5. *Missing Data*

	Range	M	SD	*t*	*p*
Web-based	0-51	4.50	7.00		
Postal	0-61	6.83	10.71	-2.54	.01

Conclusions

The opportunity to analyze data from two different survey methods provided important information about response rates and response consistency. The response rates of the two methods were similar. Attitudes toward questions concerning use of the Internet did not show a difference between the two groups of respondents. The likelihood of respondents of the mail survey using the Internet for training and accessing information about library preservation issues was the same as respondents who responded to the Web-based survey.

Librarians who responded to the postal survey were more likely to be from a small institution (with smaller FTEs). This could be an indication of why there were no e-mail addresses for these individuals. Smaller libraries tend to have less technology available for their staff, thus reducing the possibility of each member having a personal electronic address.

Although the reliability estimates from each method were well within acceptable ranges, the postal survey obtained higher values than the Web-based method. Results from researchers are mixed on this subject (Buchanan & Smith, 1999; Stanton, 1998). Further research into this phenomenon is warranted.

The results of the analysis of the different methods show that the amount of missing data is significantly reduced when the Web-based survey method is used. Although the Web-based survey did not specifically require respondents to complete all items, there were built-in safeguards to protect against providing more than one answer per item. Additionally, the ease in using the drop-down boxes and radio buttons may have provided incentive to complete the

questionnaire in its entirety. This finding is consistent with that reported by Schaefer and Dillman (1998). As research continues into the way people respond to paper-and-pencil and electronic questionnaires, this phenomenon may be explained.

The use of e-mail to link potential respondents to a Web-based questionnaire produced a response rate similar to a traditional postal survey. Although slight differences occurred in internal reliability, the values were not depressed enough to discourage the use of Web-based surveys. Additionally, it can be argued that less missing data in the responses from the Web-based survey compensates for the lower reliability. Organizations and institutions with well-developed databases of potential respondents should feel confident that responses from an electronic survey using e-mail contact with a hyperlink to a Web-based questionnaire will produce faster, less expensive, and comparable data than a traditional postal survey.

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Appendix A

Postal Questionnaire

1. How important are these preservation activities at your institution?

	Now? Very important			Not important	In three years? Very important			Not important
Disaster planning (or preparedness)	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Environmental monitoring	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Pest and mold management	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Collections conservation (book repair)	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Conservation of rare and special collections	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Library binding	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Microfilming	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Photocopying for replacement	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Digital reformatting	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4

2. Does your institution need to improve activity in these areas?

	Yes, it needs improvement			No, it is adequate
Disaster planning (or preparedness)	1	2	3	4
Environmental monitoring	1	2	3	4
Pest and mold management	1	2	3	4
Collections conservation (book repair)	1	2	3	4
Conservation of rare and special collections	1	2	3	4
Library binding	1	2	3	4
Microfilming	1	2	3	4
Photocopying for replacement	1	2	3	4
Digital reformatting	1	2	3	4

3. What is your staff training/education need in these preservation activities?

	Very much a need			Not a need
Disaster planning (or preparedness)	1	2	3	4
Environmental monitoring	1	2	3	4
Pest and mold management	1	2	3	4
Collections conservation (book repair)	1	2	3	4
Conservation of rare and special collections	1	2	3	4
Library binding	1	2	3	4
Microfilming	1	2	3	4
Photocopying for replacement	1	2	3	4
Digital reformatting	1	2	3	4

4. **Which of the following does your institution currently need? (*Check all that apply*)**
   - _____ a written disaster plan
   - _____ building renovation or construction
   - _____ mold control or prevention
   - _____ improved environmental control
   - _____ patron education on preservation
   - _____ reformatting of brittle materials (books, manuscripts, etc.)
   - _____ re-housing of archival collections
   - _____ preservation of electronic files
   - _____ preservation assessment of the institution and/or individual collections
   - _____ none

5. **What is keeping you from completing or obtaining any of the preservation activities you checked?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. **What is your preferred method for training? (*Check all that apply*)**
   - _____ one-day workshop
   - _____ two-day workshop
   - _____ conference program
   - _____ web-based training

7. **Within the last year how often did you or your staff participate in the following training activities?**

one-day workshops	Never	once	twice	3 times	> 3 times
two-day workshops	Never	once	twice	3 times	> 3 times
conference programs	Never	once	twice	3 times	> 3 times
web-based training	Never	once	twice	3 times	> 3 times

8. **Does your institution pay for you to attend training events?**
   - _____ No
   - _____ Yes ➡ **What does the institution pay? (*Check all that apply*)**
     - _____ all of the registration fee
     - _____ part of the registration fee
     - _____ all travel costs
     - _____ part of the travel costs

9. **What are the barriers to you and your staff obtaining training? (*Check all that apply*)**
   - _____ cannot travel
   - _____ limited staff
   - _____ no travel funds
   - _____ no training funds
   - _____ other (*specify*)_____
   - _____ none

10. **What is your institution's annual budget for staff training and development?** $_____

11. In what format do you get information about preservation now? (*Check all that apply*)

_____ print publications
_____ electronic publications
_____ video publications
_____ attend a training event
_____ attend a program presentation at a conference
_____ take a web-based training program
_____ Do not get information about preservation

12. Do you know about SOLINET's Preservation Field Services?

_____ No
_____ Yes ➡ **How did you find out about them? (*Check all that apply*)**

_____ referral
_____ website
_____ training event
_____ conference booth
_____ publication(s)
_____ SOLINET brochure
_____ other *(specify)* _____

13. Have you used SOLINET's Preservation Field Services in the past?

_____ 1) No
_____ 2) Yes ➡ **What is the most recent year you used the services?** _____
What services did you use? (*Check all that apply*)

___ training
___ information and referral
___ publications
___ consulting
___ audio-visual loan service

14. Have you ever hired a *preservation consultant* from somewhere other than SOLINET?

_____ 1) No
_____ 2) Yes ➡ **What is the most recent year?** _____
What did you pay? $_____
How many days did the consultant stay on-site? _____
Did you receive a written report?

___ 1) No
___ 2) Yes

15. Has your institution purchased publications on preservation topics in the last two years?

_____ 1) No
_____ 2) Yes

16. Do you use the Internet to access any of the following preservation needs? (*Check all that apply*)

_____ publications
_____ training
_____ information
_____ Do not use the Internet for preservation needs

17. Do you need (or would you like) preservation materials and activities in Spanish?

_____ 1) No
_____ 2) Yes

18. Approximately how much money did your institution spend on preservation activities in the last fiscal year?

$_____

19. How will your institution's current fiscal year's budget for preservation change from the above figure? (*Select only one*)

_____ 1) Increase by more than 50%
_____ 2) Increase by less than 50%
_____ 3) Decrease by more than 50%
_____ 4) Decrease by less than 50%
_____ 5) No change

20. What is the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff in your institution?

_____FTE

21. What does your institution need to develop and sustain your preservation activities?

Thank you for your participation!

Please return completed questionnaire to
Idleman & Associates
P.O. Box 729
Decatur, Georgia 30031

Appendix B

Web-based Survey

Text of first e-mail message

Subject: Preservation Field Services Needs Your Input

Dear Colleague:

Established in 1985, SOLINET's Preservation Field Services works to improve the ability of institutions to preserve and provide access to their collections. With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Preservation Field Services offers assistance to documentary repositories throughout the Southeast, including libraries, archives, historical societies, and museums.

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation recently provided a grant to Preservation Field Services to develop a business plan. This survey will help provide information for that plan. The questionnaire seeks information from current and potential users of Preservation Field Services, to help identify needs and possible future services.

You are an important source of the information we are seeking from your institution. ***Would you spend 10-15 minutes completing the on-line questionnaire?*** The independent research firm of Idleman & Associates is collecting the data to insure the confidentiality of your responses. One feature of the questionnaire is a request for your e-mail address. To furnish Idleman & Associates with this information affords a more efficient survey process and you will not receive further reminders about the questionnaire. Again, ***your responses are confidential*** and the request for your e-mail address is only to aid tracking of responses.

Please feel free to contact me at 404.892.0943 or Idleman & Associates at 404.815.7280 with any questions you may have about this study. Thank you for helping us provide the services that your institution needs to perform its preservation activities.

Julie Arnott, Director, Preservation Field Services

Click here for the **PRESERVATION SURVEY**

Text of second e-mail contact

Dear Colleague:

Last month we asked you to provide information about your preservation needs. We are seeking information from current and potential users of Preservation Field Services to help identify needs and possible future services. **As of today, we have not received your completed questionnaire.** You are an important source of the information we are seeking from your institution, so we are again asking for your help. **Would you spend 10 minutes completing the on-line questionnaire?**

Established in 1985, SOLINET's Preservation Field Services works to improve the ability of institutions to preserve and provide access to their collections. With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Preservation Field Services offers assistance to documentary repositories throughout the Southeast, including libraries, archives, historical societies, and museums. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation recently provided a grant to Preservation Field Services to develop a business plan. This survey will help provide information for that plan.

The independent research firm of Idleman & Associates is collecting the data to insure the confidentiality of your responses. One feature of the questionnaire is a request for your e-mail address. To furnish Idleman & Associates with this information affords a more efficient survey process and you will not receive further reminders about the questionnaire. Again, **your responses are confidential** and the request for your e-mail address is only to aid tracking of responses.

Please feel free to contact me at 404.892.0943 or Idleman & Associates at 404.815.7280 with any questions you may have about this study. Thank you for helping us provide the services that your institution needs to perform its preservation activities.

Julie Arnott, Director, Preservation Field Services

Please go to www.idleman.com/solinet for the survey

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